

FREEDOM DAY: OPPOSITION AND THE GOVERNMENT IN THE OLD FORMAT

It was repeated many times before the recent Freedom Day (the unofficial celebration of the proclamation of the Belarusian Democratic Republic on 25 March 1918 – BISS), that this should be the test for the Belarusian authorities: are they ready for the dialogue with Europe and the minimal democratization. At the same time, the action on 25 March 2007 was also the test for the opposition: will it be capable of rebuilding itself and finding a new strength after the presidential elections of 2006? The answer to both questions is negative.

The United Democratic Forces (UDF) approached the anniversary of the (19 March 2006 presidential) elections in its previous format, which was not very workable, and eventually came to be completely eroded. The problem is not only the permanent battle for leadership and the resources. The main problem is the conceptual crisis. The strategy and action plan of the UDF adopted after the elections came to be the thing in itself. First of all, the opposition failed to create a broad movement of the supporters of changes, which was the opposition's best bet to increase its popular base. Last year's period of political activism was wasted. Alexander Milinkevich began to work on this project (whose success was not self-evident anyway) only after his leadership position in the Political Council of UDF became shaken and he needed a new base. Moreover, according to opponents, the personal composition of the movement "For Freedom" largely represented members of the parties lured into the movement, which only exacerbated the coalition crisis.

Overall, an antagonistic cleavage between the supporters of Milinkevich and the rest of the opposition had been formed by the time the anniversary of the mass protest against the official results of last year's presidential elections was to be celebrated. The rest seek a new Congress of Democratic Forces to reform the opposition and work out the new program documents (even though some experts, based on the announcements, express doubts in the conceptual strengths of the proposed resolutions of the congress).

The idea of a symbolic remake of the Square came to life in the fall of 2006. However, the opposition failed the campaign in favor of this idea during last year's presidential elections. They wasted time setting up the date for the action that had to initiate a new "hot spring" of protests. As a result, the opposition chose not 19 March (the anniversary of last year's elections) but 25 March, the traditional opposition Freedom Day. This also diluted the idea of the action.

Against the background of the internal fight within the coalition, it is logical that the preparation to the Freedom Day was far from being coherent. Time and effort was wasted, for example, to discuss the aesthetics of the advertisement. Mutual recriminations of a quiet sabotage were pronounced. Deputy leader of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party Anatol Laukovich withdrew from the group of initiators of the action before the event. Communists, for whom the May Day is major spring holiday, ignored the event. Only the open letter of Milinkevich to the president and the appeal of the group of intellectuals to the government to recognize 25 March as the starting point of national consolidation for the defense of independence and the civilizational European future of Belarus could be considered as a political know how.

Observers also noticed shortcomings in the conduct of the action. For example, several meeting points around the October square eased the task for security forces to dissect the protesters. The rally was organized according to the standard scenario, and people began to disperse after the first speeches. Most importantly, rank and file participants could not hear a clear message. Hence, the political opponents of the government face a pressing issue of the strategy, key ideas, and algorithm of actions.

Soon after the last year's elections, some opposition leaders bet on the pro-independence rhetoric. They span the threat of a hypothetical referendum on the union with Russia and proposed to create a block "For Independence." But in reality, the slogans of sovereignty had long stopped being the monopoly of the opposition; they were quietly appropriated by the official leader, who, during the "oil and gas war," de-facto positioned himself as a defender of sovereignty from the "energy empire." Also failed was the hope on the upcoming economic crisis and, correspondingly, swift politicization of ordinary citizens after the energy price hikes.

It is evident that the cleavage between the tiny titular opposition restricted to its own circle, and a numerous (20-30%, according to various data) layer of hard-line opponents of the political regime. The phenomenon of the Square, series of flash mobs and some other picturesque expressions of the political protest were the result of self-organization of the supporters of changes, on whom the leadership of UDF is theoretically based. Titular opposition leaders have no authority in the eyes of a large part of the democratically minded compatriots. It goes without saying that the UDF have no tools to influence other groups of the electorate. Even while the oppositions options are strictly limited by the authoritarian regime, it tends to chose the worst scenarios within the narrow corridor of available options. The academic nature of the opposition leadership was highlighted by the recent local elections and the "oil and gas war." A beneficial chance for public relations and political positioning was wasted. Lousy actions of the UDF allowed some analysts to affirm that the titular opposition was in principle unable to formulate and implement strong answers to the challenges of the time.

Anyway, the West is obviously unable to integrate a small, disunited opposition into the proposed dialogue with the government. At the same time, the break-up of the opposition coalition, apart from the personal ambitions of leaders and the struggle for resources, is further encouraged by the absence of coordination in the "Belarusian issue" between the West and Russia. "Pro-Western" and "Pro-Russian" wings of the opposition exchange mutual accusations in the betrayal of national interests.

As for the government, it applied the repressive know-how of preventive cleansing that was first introduced one year ago. Before and directly during 25 March, several dozens, up to 100, opposition activists were arrested. One third of them were sentenced to brief jail terms, usually on trademark charges of swearing in public. Others were simply kept at police stations. The police also intimidated potential protesters. The authorities obviously tried to demonstrate strength while not infuriating the West. That is why the protesters were not let into the October square, one column was dispersed by force. Otherwise, however, compared to other Freedom Days, there was no usual brutality. And the organizers have been spared from punitive acts so far, even though it was usually done on previous occasions.

The novelty in political technology was the organization of two official performances on 25 March under the slogan "for Independent Belarus!" Those concerts gave the head of state an opportunity to accuse the opposition of destructive acts. "We gave them best spaces, please come ... but they don't want to do it together, why? Because if they act together with the government the West won't give them money. This is a destructive opposition."

At the same time, it should not be ruled out that the authorities will try to gradually assimilate this date. The head of state deprived opposition opponents of the monopoly on pro-independence rhetoric. Now, the monopoly on the Freedom Day can be diluted as well. Hence, the opposition once again faces the problem of political creativity.

Postfactum, talking to journalists on 28 March, Alexander Lukashenka gave an indirect answer to the calls to a dialogue pronounced by the opposition leaders. He declared that the opposition does not represent a serious force, and hence there was no need to change tactics in relations with it.

Hence, it is obvious that the government will try to stick to the existing political model for as long as it is possible, allowing under the pressure of circumstances only minimal cosmetic changes. In the relations with the West, first of all the European Union, it will most likely use the tactics of a protracted game with a hope that the EU would eventually retreat from the demands of democratization in order to solve the pragmatic issues, such as energy security.

At the same time, the Belarusian leadership is aware of the systemic threats presented by the Kremlin's new policies and at the same time the growing pressure by the West. One can presume that the official leader is far more concerned about the relations with the pro-democratic part of the society (much broader than the titular opposition) and the West (first of all because of the Russian pressure).

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